



Date of Council Meeting: July 21, 2014

## **TOWN OF LEESBURG TOWN COUNCIL MEETING**

**Subject:** Leesburg Economic Development Ambassador Program

**Staff Contact:** Marantha Edwards, Economic Development Director

**Recommendation:** The Town Council review and endorse the Leesburg Economic Development Commission's Ambassador Program.

**Issue:** Is the program comprehensively designed and planned to minimize Town resources, while enhancing the positive impact of economic development business outreach in the Town of Leesburg?

**Fiscal Analysis:** The cost of the program is inherent in the existing Economic Development staff work with the Economic Development Commission.

**Background:**

**Program description from the Economic Development Commission:**

The proposed Economic Development Commission Ambassador Program can best be explained by answering the questions asked and comments made by Council Members during the program presentation delivered to Council at their February 24, 2014 Work Session. The following information was approved by a (6-0-1) vote at the Town's EDC meeting on July 10, 2014.

**Have to be "clear" on the Ambassador Program Mission. *Council Member Butler***

The Ambassador Program mission is to expand the reach of Economic Development efforts and increase the number of Town-to-business meetings conducted annually without increasing the load on existing Town staff or requiring additional full time equivalent staff members.

**Is there a way to start small? *Council Member Hammler***

The program will initially be limited to two (2) Ambassadors and will expand to a maximum of ten (10) Ambassadors. Expansion will be driven by success of the initial effort such that subsequent flights of Ambassadors will be dispatched only after the early, limited efforts to select, vet and train Ambassadors produce positive results.

**Who will qualify, vet and train Ambassadors? *Council Member Wright***

Ambassadors will be selected and vetted as any other Commission appointee; sourced from advertisement, selections made by Council, recommendations by EDC, and responses to a volunteer call from those expressing interest during Forums\*. Appointees will be trained in

FOIA, COIA, an *overview* of Town departments and the format of the Ambassador business visit. As a part of training, all Ambassadors will participate in role modeling visits with a panel comprised of EDC members and ED staff prior to any actual meetings with Town businesses.

**How do we avoid conflicts of interest?** *All Council Members*

The Ambassador visits are NOT an opportunity for Ambassador's to pitch their personal business entities. Training will include a substantial focus on COIA and "visited" businesses will be asked to independently complete and submit a survey of the meeting results directly to ED staff to track any unsuitable discussions. The Commonwealth and Town have laws regarding disclosure as well as other long standing policy and process that continue to perform extraordinarily well in preventing conflicts of interest.

**How will the program identify trends?** *Council Member Martinez*

The goal of the Ambassador business visit is to

- Foster Town/Business relationships
- Enhance business retention
- Refer problems, issues or questions to appropriate Town departments,
- Identify positive concepts that foster business growth and survivability

The Ambassador business visits are intended to be more about listening than telling. Ambassadors will pose a series of brief questions to facilitate discussion and to identify business issues, trends, challenges and constraints that if properly addressed, should improve resilience of the commercial tax base and optimize relationships between the businesses and the Town government. During each business visit, Ambassadors will deliver tools developed by the EDC and Economic Development staff including;

- Business Launch Pad
- Dashboard
- Retail Opportunity Analysis (relevant to the retail sector)
- An ever expanding tool kit of economic development resources

After business visits, the Ambassador will promptly submit meeting summaries to Town ED staff that include the name of the business and person interviewed, the business's answers to facilitating questions, any challenges, suggestions, ideas and positive/negative feedback received during the visit. An unedited package of meeting summaries will be submitted monthly to the EDC and the Town Manager to identify any trends. Ultimately, an executive summary and the trend report will be submitted quarterly to Town Council. Follow up and feedback to the affected businesses from any Council policy will be prepared by Town Economic Development staff.

Businesses will be asked to submit written feedback of the Ambassador's visit, in the form of a survey, to Town Economic Development Staff. Trends are identified by reviewing the reports for consistent themes, complaints or positive dynamics.

Any specific, time sensitive issues requiring referral from EDC to another Town Department will be sent to Town Manager for potential follow-up assignment.

**How will the Program help avoid policy surprises?** *Council Member Burk*

The Program follows the fundamental economic development department activities of

- Generating conversation

- Generating awareness

- Generating jobs & investments

The conversations will increase business owner/operator awareness of Town policies as the topics discussed are expected to include the most common

- “How do I do....?”

- “Who do I speak with about....?”, or

- “Why is it that...” etc.

Ambassadors will be trained to refer these questions and issues through the Economic Development staff to the Town Manager for assignment and necessary follow-up by the appropriate department. This process gives the Town departments and businesses an opportunity for direct positive interaction and to showcase the value of the Town as a business resource.

The priority of which businesses will be visited by Ambassadors is:

- New Businesses

- Businesses with known positive or negative issues

Prioritization criteria will be further developed as the Ambassador program unfolds.

### **What are the measurable results? *Council Member Dunn***

Most importantly, the Leesburg Ambassador program will increase the number of Town-to-business interactions and demonstrate that the Town is a significant and positive provider of services and solutions for the commercial business sector. These types of programs have performed the function of improving the brand for local governments in many jurisdictions across the country. The opportunity to identify trends and illuminate commonly experienced issues creates data that provide an early warning system to help elected officials make better informed decisions earlier and with greater positive impact to the quality of life for the entire community. In short, the program can help us know what we do not now know about the drivers and dynamics affecting our community's commercial businesses.

### **Adjunct Program related activities**

#### **Forums\***

The EDC intends to conduct three business Forums annually (Spring Summer, Fall). Each Forum will be open to the public and all Leesburg businesses will be invited to attend. The scope of the first forum (Spring 2015) is to introduce the Ambassador Program. Subsequent forum decisions on the same elements will be partially informed by the first forum and preceding Ambassador visit results.

#### **Surveys**

In preparation of the business Forums, the EDC will conduct two business surveys. Simple in format and made up of a limited number of open ended questions, the surveys are intended to identify issues affecting local businesses. The surveys will provide an opportunity for business Owners/Operators, Property Owners, Property Developers and Real Estate professionals to sign-up for:

Business Directory

BizBuzz News Letter

Other Town/EDC communications via list serves or any new mechanisms

Town policy is currently communicated passively (via the Town website) and actively (via newsletters) but the website requires businesses to search the site when many lack strong computing and internet skills. The Town can begin to “push” information to businesses more effectively as our business Owners/Operators, Property Owners, Property Developers and Real Estate professionals sign-up for emerging internet based communications.